



Japan's Textbook Inequality: How Cultural Bias Impedes Upon Second Language Acquisition

by Zelinda Sherlock (Kyushu Sangyo University, Japan)



Introduction

The portrayal of English users and the use of English in textbooks “may be an important source of influence in the construction of students’ attitudes and perceptions to the target language” (Matsuda, 2002, p. 196). Furthermore, if social stereotypes serve as a foundation for language attitudes (Cargile & Bradac, 2001), it is likely that the racial hierarchy in Japan may also explain Japanese attitudes toward varieties of English and subsequently what cultures and viewpoints should be prevalent in English education textbooks. As Kubota eloquently surmised:

...we must address larger social issues, including different forms of racism, which perpetuate the racial, cultural, and linguistic hierarchy of power and prevents students from having valuable opportunities to learn about diverse views and human experiences. In this sense, nonnative teachers need to play an activist role” (2009).

Background

As far back as 1981, Hayashino commented on English textbooks in Japan, describing them as boring, monotonous, and meaningless. In 1987, Kawano researched and wrote an in depth analysis on the cultural contents of English textbooks at high schools in Japan. She noted that natives of Australia and Canada were depicted in a patronizing and pessimistic manner and were represented as isolated from mainstream society.

Kawano (1987) submitted that textbooks in Japan should contain more dialogue between Japanese, and models of minorities speaking English, as English is considered a global language. Her study found ethnic and cultural bias in the textbooks and pointed out that the dominant groups, white Americans, were portrayed as smart, wealthy and bright. This bias perspective thwarts students from becoming proficient in English and deprives students from developing true inter-national awareness. “It is shameful if English classes are producing in students near-sightedness instead of a global view, racism instead of intercultural thinking” (Kawano, 1987, p. 107).

Kubota noted (1998), that the non-native speaker of English, or the ‘other’, is perceived as ...uncivilized and inferior to the Anglo speaker of

English. Learning English, a language of the ‘civilized,’ has been one of the means for the Japanese to identify themselves with Westerners. Here the Japanese identity is split - although the Japanese are Asians, they have wished to identify themselves with Westerners, and their Asian self as well as other Asian peoples have been perceived as the inferior Other (p. 298).

In his 1973 book, Lakoff discussed how society is reflected in language, with values and assumptions held by society being mirrored through language. Halliday (1978) suggested that society delineates the language that is apposite for certain situations and that the context and culture regulate correct language. Consequently, if English language textbooks portray language that is not suited for certain situations or do not accurately represent society, the language learned may therefore be unsuitable and a cause of cross-cultural pragmatic failure (Thomas 1983).

Regarding the Japanese context Russell (1991) explains:

...the Japanese have been heavily influenced by Western values and racial paradigms, imported along with Dutch learning and Western science in their rush to catch up with the West...[Moreover], in the postwar period in particular . . . these enduring stereotypes of the black Other have been in large part reinforced by the centrality of American discourse on the nonwhite Other in Japan which...has resulted in Japan’s uncritical acceptance and indigenization of the racial hierarchies they project (p. 5).

Various commentators (Befu, 2001; Fujimoto, 2002; Haarmann, 1984) have asserted that as Japan has largely adopted the US racial hierarchy, it is foreseeable that white Others are generally afforded high prestige, whereas non-white Others (e.g. blacks and Koreans) are often maligned. Pierce (1995) argued that the role, which learners make for themselves in society, is presided over by their use of English. Subsequently, the language and the social roles learners are exposed to are critical elements of the language curriculum and, as such, should be carefully scrutinized.

If English language textbooks are indeed interpreted and viewed as representing other cultures, stereotypes and perspectives, these impressions will no doubt impact upon a learner’s view of that society/culture in comparison to their

own. Seemingly simple biases of characters within a textbook, such as their activities, choice of response, age, forms of address, occupation, income, dress, perspectives and ways of living, are but a few examples of elements that may impact upon a learner's conscious and subconscious view of that culture. Thus, the portrayal of users and use of English in textbooks "may be an important source of influence in the construction of students' attitudes and perceptions" of the target language (Matsuda, 2002, p. 196). Furthermore, if social stereotypes serve as a foundation for language attitudes (Cargile & Bradac, 2001), it is likely that the racial hierarchy in Japan may also explain Japanese attitudes toward varieties of English and subsequently what cultures and viewpoints should be prevalent in English education textbooks.

Erikawa's (1995) work demonstrated some of the prejudice contained within early textbooks used in the Meiji Period, revealing an established racial bias towards English native speakers. The *Mitchell's New School Geography* textbook published in 1872 classified individuals into five groups: 'savage,' 'barbarous,' 'half-civilized,' 'civilized,' and 'civilized and enlightened.'

Erikawa pointed out that as late as the early 1970s, Native Americans and Africans depicted in English textbooks used in Japan were not afforded independent ethnic and cultural status. The characters were typecast as subject to the white, saved by the white, or attacking the white. It is no wonder then that even today, textbooks present negative views about minority out-groups, whilst avoiding the damaging charge of being prejudiced.

Erikawa also quotes from the *Standard Jack and Betty* textbook published in 1956 which noted, 'Some of them (languages) are less important, for there are not many people who speak them. English is one of the most important languages because many people use it.' Taking this comment at face value and voiding any context, this comment is essentially true for the Japanese. Other languages are less important and therefore there is no a need to learn them, within the Japanese context. However, this is an example of subtle and covert inequality, presenting a negative view about minority groups, whilst masquerading as a valid comment. The insinuation of this passage is the superiority of English, of native speakers of English, as well as of their culture and society.

Almost forty years on from this textbook, March (1992) discussed how it has become fashionable to hold in high regard white Others, and comments that the Japanese have a 'gaijin [white foreigner] complex'; but that it is also

equally essential to look down at non-white Others in order to maintain one's place in the racialized hierarchy. Textbooks used during that time provide insight and are samples of how the language, culture, values and ideologies were viewed; almost like time capsules of the hidden curriculum (McGrath, 2002).

What about textbooks used today, in the 21st century? Is inequality or bias contained in a subtle and covert manner? Do current English language textbooks steer away from the internalized Anglo-Saxon views of the world (Nakamura, 1989) and the lens through which the Japanese have viewed other minority groups (Nakamura, 1991)?

Current Textbooks

Klein (1985) poses that omission is alleged to be one of the most prevalent forms of bias and that reading materials need scrutiny, because "the most dangerous aspect of omission is that books may very effectively conceal what is left out of them, or even that anything has been left out" (p. 30). Apple's (1982) theory on the construction of curriculum is appropriate to keep in mind when analyzing and discussing the diffusion of any curriculum. If society is a product of the past, then the curriculum just like society will mirror it, containing both strengths and weaknesses.

If as Apple (1982) suggests, the curriculum is never neutral, but is a social construction created to serve political interests, reproduce inequality and promote certain types of knowledge, then the motives and political agenda behind textbooks used to implement the curriculum is relevant to understanding the cultural beliefs and prioritized knowledge that reinforce the dominance of Japanese culture.

In 2014, a New York Times article criticized Japan's education strategy for being "divided." It claimed that, "Japan's simultaneous embrace of nationalism and cosmopolitanism is generating ambiguous signals from its education policy makers. They are rewriting textbooks along what they call 'patriotic' lines, alienating their Asian neighbors in the process" (Fitzpatrick, 2014).

In response to this, the Minister of Education stated, "A dramatic change in the direction of education is underway in Japan in order to respond to globalization – not to promote nationalism. The reforms we are undertaking center on three main areas: foreign language education, the internationalization of Japanese universities, and the teaching of Japan's traditions, culture, and history to strengthen students' sense of identity" (MEXT, 2014).

It is logical to infer from this that English education texts have been updated and rewritten to account for this dramatic change in direction. Unfortunately, the same textbooks that were used since the implementation of the 2002 and 2003 Action Plan are still being used today.

Textbook Depictions

Yamanaka (2006) and Matsuda (2002) both conducted extensive studies on how foreign countries are represented within textbooks in Japan. Both used qualitative methods to code data using 'all direct and indirect references to nations' and 'nationality', respectively. After coding the data and identifying the relevant units, these were later collated for the purpose of counting. These studies discovered that English-speaking countries dominated the textbooks, while Asian and African cultures were seldom depicted. Realistically various different people from heterogeneous cultural backgrounds speak English, subsequently the logical inference should be that English language textbooks should reflect this reality. But the contrary is true, allowing inevitable criticism of English language textbooks used in Japan.

Matsuda (2002) further asserts that texts and exercises follow morphological and syntactic rules of American English as do vocabulary items and spelling. She contends that such an approach limits learners' exposure to an American perspective and deprives students of valuable opportunities to learn about different variations of English, which may lead them to view other varieties of English as nonstandard and deficient. Such racist sentiments have led to the development of discursive strategies or 'ways of talking' that enable majorities to present negative views about minority out-groups or omit their views entirely from the narrative. It was against this inequality or what has been termed 'linguistic discrimination', that Kachru (1985) and other academics have advocated the new paradigm of World Englishes.

The Ministry of Education in Japan approves certain textbooks used as part of the national English language curriculum, and it is these specific textbooks that have been argued to contain prejudicial content. In the *Milestone English Reading Textbook* at p. 103, it states "That is why when we Japanese abandon dogs, the English criticize us, saying that we are not fulfilling our responsibility as human beings. It follows from their way of thinking that mercy killing is the proper way of handling unwanted dogs" (Schneer, 2007).

Additionally, in the *Unicorn English Reading Textbook* at p.124, it states –"Japanese have come to have two characteristic attitudes: they have a great curiosity for high quality foreign cultures, which they seek to adapt and improve; but at the same time, they feel a certain inferiority complex" (Schneer, 2007).

The use of the phrase "high quality foreign cultures," is worth noting as this discourse has two primary implications, along with numerous others. The two primary implications are as follows:

- 1) There are cultures, which are not high quality and therefore not worthy of improving or adapting. The Japanese have some criteria-based ranking system, which they employ to assess the quality of a foreign culture and
- 2) The Japanese culture is above those cultures defined/considered low quality and Japanese people are, therefore, not curious about them.

Reading texts within nationally approved junior high school textbooks present Japanese and Western cultures as facts. Essentializing cultures or peoples through narratives based on "critical incidents" will necessarily misrepresent them, often reinforcing stereotypes and an us-and-them mentality (Schneer, 2007). Ideally, students should be learning from a neutral textbook, one filled with depictions and representations of individuals from a variety of different nations, instead of from the dominant view considered to be at the pinnacle point of the racial hierarchy.

Conclusion

From the evidence provided to the literature presently available, it appears that very little has evolved in the area of English textbooks in Japan, from the labeling first articulated in *The Mitchell's New School Geography* in 1872 up to the present unflattering depictions and omitted views of minority groups. It appears that current textbooks need an overhaul but, at the very least, teachers should receive training on how to discuss issues of bias, racism, inequality and prejudice contained within the textbooks they are using.

The language and social roles that learners are exposed to are critical elements of the language curriculum and, as such, should be carefully scrutinized. If English language textbooks are indeed interpreted and viewed as representing other cultures, stereotypes and perspectives, these impressions will no doubt impact upon a learner's view of that society/culture in comparison to their own.

One way of doing so is to have groups of students

Seemingly simple biases expressed in the discriminatory depiction of foreign characters within textbooks, such as their activities, choice of dialogue, forms of address, occupation, income, dress, perspectives and ways of living, are but a few examples of elements that may impact upon a learner's conscious and subconscious view of that culture. Students should be made aware of the various ethnic and racial groups within English speaking countries, instead of representing the white American view as the dominant standpoint.

In an increasingly globalized world and with the lead up to the Tokyo Olympics, students in Japan need to be exposed to the plethora of cultures, individuals and ethnicities that are part of the global English speaking community. This introduction will chip away at the long-standing idea that English is a white language, even today, and gradually reduce the perception in Japan that other languages and cultures rate lower on the racial hierarchy that is still currently maintained. The generation today needs to be educated about the variety and diversity that exists in the world, in an effort to augment equality and respect for individuals from all nations.

REFERENCES

- Apple, M. (1982). *Education and Power*. New York: Routledge.
- Befu, H. (2001) *Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of Nihonjinron*. Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press.
- Cargile, A. and Bradac, J. (2001) Attitudes toward language. In W.B. Gudykunst (ed.), *Communication Yearbook 25* (pp. 347- 382). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Erikawa, H. (1995) Eigo teikoku shugi no gazogaku: Kyokasho no sashie no bunseki o toshite (A study of figurative images of English imperialism: Through an analysis of textbook illustrations). *Gendai Eigo Kyoiku (Modern English Teaching)*, 31, 16-19.
- Fitzpatrick, M. (2014). *Japan's Divided Education Strategy*. New York Times. Oct. 12, 2014. Retrieved: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/13/world/asia/japans-divided-education-strategy.html?_r=0
- Fujimoto, E. (2002) Japanese-ness, Whiteness, and the 'Other' in Japan's internationalization. In M.J. Collier (Ed.), *Transforming communication about culture* (Vol. 24, pp. 1-24). California: Sage.
- Haarmann, H. (1984) The role of ethnocultural stereotypes and foreign languages in Japanese commercials. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 50, 101-121.
- Halliday, M. (1978). *Language as a social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.

- Atkinson, D. (1999) 'TESOL and culture.' *TESOL*
- Hayashino, Shigeki. (1981). *Minshuteki Jinkaku-keisei to Eigo Kyoiku*. Tokyo: Sanyusha Shuppan
- Kachru, B. B. (1985). Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism. In R. Quirk & H. G. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the world* (pp. 11-30). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kawano, M. (1987). *An analysis of cultural contents of high school English textbooks in Japan*. Retrieved https://circle.ubc.ca/bitstream/handle/2429/26851/UBC_1987_A8%20K39.pdf?sequence=1
- Klein, G. (1985). *Reading into Racism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Kubota, R. (1998). Ideologies of English in Japan. *World Englishes*, 3, 295-306.
- Kubota, R. (2009). *Non-native English Speakers in TESOL (NNEST) of the Month Blog*. Retrieved <http://nnesintsol.blogspot.jp/2009/11/ryuko-kubota.html>
- Lakoff, R. (1973). Language and woman's place. *Language in Society*, 2, 45-80.
- March, M. (1992). *Working for a Japanese company*. Tokyo: Kodansha International.
- Matsuda, A. (2002). Representation of users and uses of English in beginning Japanese EFL textbooks. *JALT Journal*, 24, 182-200.
- McGrath, I. (2002). *Materials evaluation and design for language teaching*. Edinburgh University Press.
- MEXT (2014). Japan's Divided Education Strategy. www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/1353287.htm
- Nakamura, K. (1989). *Eigo wa donna gengo ka (What is the English language?)*. Tokyo: Sanseido.
- Nakamura, K. (1991). Eigo kyoiku no ideorogi 1. (Ideology of English Education 1). *Gendai Eigo Kyoiku (Modern English Teaching)*, 28 (10), 30-1.
- Otlowski, M. (2003). *Ethnic Diversity and Gender Bias in EFL Textbooks*. Retrieved from www.asian-efl-journal.com/june_03_mo.pdf
- Pierce, B. (1995). Social identity, investment and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 24, 105-112.
- Russell, J. (1991) Race and reflexivity: The black other in contemporary Japanese mass culture. *Cultural Anthropology*, 6, 3-25.
- Schneer, D. (2007). (Inter) nationalism and English textbooks endorsed by the Ministry of Education in Japan. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41, 601-607.
- Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4, 20-39.
- Yamanaka, N. (2006). An evaluation of English textbooks in Japan from the viewpoint of nations in the Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles. *JALT Journal*, 28, 57-76.

Zelinda Sherlock

Kyushu Sangyo University, Fukuoka, Japan

E-mail: <zsherlock37@gmail.com>